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Andrea HIRATA

CHAPTER 1

Ten New Students

THAT morning, when I was just a boy, I sat on a long bench outside of a school. The branch of an old *filicium* tree shaded me. My father sat beside me, hugging my shoulders with both of his arms as he nodded and smiled to each parent and child sitting side by side on the bench in front of us. It was an important day: the first day of elementary school.

At the end of those long benches was an open door, and inside was an empty classroom. The door frame was crooked. The entire school, in fact, leaned as if it would collapse at any moment. In the doorway stood two teachers, like hosts welcoming guests to a party. There was an old man with a patient face, Bapak K.A. Harfan Efendy Noor, or Pak Harfan—the school principal—and a young woman wearing a *jilbab*, or headscarf, Ibu N.A. Muslimah Hafsari, or Bu Mus for short. Like my father, they also were smiling.

Yet Bu Mus' smile was a forced smile: she was apprehensive. Her face was tense and twitching nervously. She kept counting the number of children sitting on the long benches, so worried that she didn't even care about the sweat pouring down onto her eyelids. The sweat beading around her nose smudged her powder makeup, streaking her face and making her look like the queen's servant in *Dul Muluk*, an ancient play in our village.

"Nine people, just nine people, *Pamanda* Guru, still short one," she said anxiously to the principal. Pak Harfan stared at her with an empty look in his eyes.

I too felt anxious. Anxious because of the restless Bu Mus, and because of the sensation of my father's burden spreading over my entire body. Although he seemed friendly and at ease this morning, his rough arm hanging around my neck gave away his quick heartbeat. I knew he was nervous, and I was aware that it wasn't easy for a 47-year-old miner with a lot of children and a small salary to send his son to school. It would have been much easier to send me to work as a helper for a Chinese grocery stall owner at the morning market, or to the coast to work as a coolie to help ease the family's financial burdens. Sending a child to school meant tying oneself to years of costs, and that was no easy matter for our family.

"My poor father."

I didn't have the heart to look him in the eye.

"It would probably be better if I just went home, forgot about school, followed in the footsteps of some of my older brothers and cousins, and became a coolie..."

My father wasn't the only one trembling. The face of each parent showed that they weren't really sitting on those long benches. Their thoughts, like my father's, were drifting off to the morning market as they imagined their sons better off as workers. These parents weren't convinced that their children's education, which they could only afford up to junior high, would brighten their families' futures. This morning they were forced to be at this school, either to avoid reproach from government officials for not sending their children to school, or to submit to modern demands to free their children from illiteracy.

I knew all of the parents and children sitting in front of me—except for one small, dirty boy with curly, red hair, trying to wriggle free from his father's grasp. His father wasn't wearing shoes and had on cheap, cotton pants. I didn't know them.

The rest of them were my good friends. Like Trapani sitting on his mother's lap, or Kucai sitting next to his father, or Sahara, who earlier had gotten very angry at her mother because she wanted to

go into the classroom quickly, or Syahdan, who wasn't accompanied by anyone. We were neighbors, and we were Belitong-Malays from the poorest community on the island. As for this school, Muhammadiyah Elementary School, it too was the poorest village school in Belitong. There were only three reasons why parents enrolled their children here. The first, Muhammadiyah Elementary didn't require any fees, and parents could contribute whatever they could afford whenever they could do so. The second, the parents feared that their children had weak character and could easily be led astray by the Devil, so they wanted them to have strong Islamic guidance from a young age. The third, their child wasn't accepted at any other school.

Bu Mus, who was growing increasingly fretful, stared at the main road, hoping there would still be another new student. Seeing her empty hope scared us. So unlike other elementary schools that were full of happiness when welcoming the students of their newest class, the atmosphere on the first day at Muhammadiyah Elementary School was full of concern, and the most concerned of all were Bu Mus and Pak Harfan.

Those humble teachers were in this nerve-wracking situation because of a warning issued by the School Superintendent from the South Sumatra Department of Education and Culture: If Muhammadiyah Elementary School had fewer than ten new students, then the oldest school in Belitong would be shut down. Therefore Bu Mus and Pak Harfan were worried about being shut down, while the parents were worried about expenses, and we—the nine small children caught in the middle—were worried we may not get to go to school at all.

Last year Muhammadiyah Elementary School only had eleven students. Pak Harfan was pessimistic that they would meet the target of ten this year, so he secretly prepared a school-closing speech. The fact that he only needed one more student would make this speech even more painful to give.

"We will wait until eleven o'clock," Pak Harfan said to Bu Mus and the already hopeless parents. The atmosphere was silent.

Bu Mus' face was puffy from holding back tears. I understood how she felt, because her hope to teach was as great as our hope to go to school. Today was Bu Mus' first day as a teacher, a moment she had been dreaming of for a very long time. She had just graduated the week before from *Sekolah Kepandaian Putri* (Vocational Girls' School), a junior high school in the capital of the regency, Tanjong Pandan. She was only fifteen years old. Sadly, her fiery spirit to be a teacher was about to be doused by a bitter reality—the threat of her school closing because they were short by just one student.

Bu Mus stood like a statue under the bell, staring out at the wide schoolyard and the main road. No one appeared. The sun rose higher to meet the middle of the day. Waiting for one more student was like trying to catch the wind.

In the meantime, the parents probably took the shortage of one student as a sign for their children—it would be better if they sent them to work. The other children and I felt heartbroken: heartbroken to face our disadvantaged parents, heartbroken to witness the final moments before the old school closed on the very day we were supposed to start, and heartbroken to know that our strong desire to study would be crushed just because we were lacking one student. Our heads hung low.

It was five till eleven. Bu Mus could no longer hide her dejection. Her big dreams for this poor school were about to fall apart before they could even take off, and thirty-two faithful years of Pak Harfan's unrewarded service were about to come to a close on this tragic morning.

"Just nine people *Pamanda Guru*," Bu Mus uttered shakily once again. She had already reached the point where she wasn't thinking clearly, repeating the same thing everyone already knew. Her voice was grave, normal for someone with a sinking heart.

Finally, time was up. It was already five after eleven and the total number of students still did not equal ten. My overwhelming enthusiasm for school dwindled away. I took my father's arms off of my shoulders. Sahara sobbed in her mother's embrace because she really wanted to go to Muhammadiyah Elementary School. She wore socks and shoes, a *jilbab*, a blouse, and she also had books, a water bottle and a backpack—all were new.

Pak Harfan went up to the parents and greeted them one by one. It was devastating. The parents patted him on the back to console him, and Bu Mus' eyes glistened as they filled to the brim with tears. Pak Harfan stood in front of the parents. He looked devastated as he prepared to give his final speech. However, when he went to utter his first words, '*Assalamu'alaikum, Peace be upon you*', Trapani yelled and pointed to the edge of the schoolyard, startling everyone.

"Harun!"

Immediately, we all turned to look, and off in the distance was a tall, skinny boy, clumsily headed our way. His clothes and hairstyle were very neat. He wore a long-sleeved white shirt tucked into his shorts. His knees knocked together when he moved, forming an x as his body wobbled along. A plump, middle-aged woman was trying with great difficulty to hold onto him. That boy was Harun, a funny boy and a good friend of ours. He was already 15 years old, the same age as Bu Mus, but was a bit behind mentally. He was extremely happy and moving quickly, half running, as if he couldn't wait to get to us. He paid no attention to his mother, who stumbled after him, trying to hold onto his hand.

They were both nearly out of breath when they arrived in front of Pak Harfan.

"Bapak Guru," said his mother, gasping for breath. "Please accept Harun. The Special Needs School is all the way on Bangka Island. We don't have the money to send him there."

Harun folded his arms over his chest, beaming happily. His mother continued.

"And more importantly, it's better that he's here at this school rather than at home, where he just chases my chicks around."

Harun smiled widely, showing his long, yellow teeth.

Pak Harfan was smiling too. He looked over to Bu Mus and shrugged his shoulders.

"It makes ten," he said.

Harun had saved us! We clapped and cheered. Sahara, who couldn't sit any longer, stood up straight to fix the folds on her *jilbab* and firmly threw on her backpack. Bu Mus blushed. The young teacher's tears subsided, and she wiped the sweat from her powder-smudged face.

CHAPTER 2

The Pine Tree Man

Bu Mus, who, just a few minutes earlier, had been on edge with a puffy, smudged face, now transformed into a budding Giant Himalayan Lily. She held herself high like the poised stem of that beautiful flower. Her veil was the soft white of the lily, and her clothes even gave off the flower's vanilla aroma. She cheerfully began to assign our seats.

Bu Mus went up to each parent seated on the long benches, striking up friendly conversations with them before taking roll call. Everyone had already entered the classroom and gotten their deskmates, except for me and that small, dirty boy with the curly, red hair whom I didn't know. He could not sit still, and he smelled like burnt rubber.

"Pak Cik, your son will share a desk with Lintang," Bu Mus said to my father.

Oh, so that is his name, *Lintang*. What a strange name.

Hearing the decision, Lintang squirmed around, struggling to break loose so he could enter the classroom. His father was trying hard to calm him down, but Lintang wriggled free, pulling away from his father's grasp, then jumped up and rushed into the class to find his seat on his own. I was left behind, watching from outside. He was like a little kid sitting on a pony—delighted, not wanting to get down. He had just leapt over fate and grabbed education by the horns.

Bu Mus approached Lintang's father. He resembled a pine tree struck by lightning: black, withered, thin and stiff. He was a fisherman, but his face was like that of a kind shepherd, showing he was a gentle, good-hearted and hopeful man. However, like most Indonesians, he wasn't aware that education is a basic human right.

Unlike other fishermen, he spoke softly. He told Bu Mus a story.

"Yesterday," he said nervously, "a flock of *pelintang pulau* birds visited the coast."

He went on to tell her about how the sacred birds perched momentarily on the tip of an almond tree, signaling that a storm was brewing, and the weather grew increasingly worse, stirring up the anger of the sea. Belitong fishermen, like Lintang's father, strongly believed these birds came to the island to warn of approaching storms.

Without a doubt, all previous generations of men from this pine tree man's family were unable to lift themselves from the endemic cycle of poverty, inevitably becoming fishermen in the Malay community. These fishermen were unable to work for themselves—not for lack of sea, but lack of boats. This year, Lintang's father wanted to break that cycle. His eldest son, Lintang, would not become a fisherman like himself. Instead, Lintang would sit beside the other small boy with curly hair—me—and would ride a bike to and from school every day. If his true calling was to be a fisherman, then the 40-kilometer journey over a red gravel road would break his determination. That burnt smell I noticed earlier was actually the smell of his *cunghai* sandals, made from car tires. They were worn down because Lintang had pedaled his bicycle for so long.

Lintang's family was from Tanjong Kelumpang, a village not far from the edge of the sea. In order to get there, you had to pass through four thatch palm areas, swampy places that were hair-raising for people from our village. In those spooky palm areas, it wasn't uncommon to encounter a crocodile as large as a coconut tree crossing the road. Lintang's coastal village was in the most eastern part of Sumatra and could be said to be the most isolated and impoverished part of Belitong Island. For Lintang, the city district of our school was like a metropolitan city, and to get there he had to begin his bicycle journey at *subuh*, early morning prayer, around four o'clock a.m. Ah! A child that small....

ΩΩ

When I caught up to Lintang inside the classroom, he greeted me with a strong handshake, like a father shaking hands with his daughter's first suitor. The overabundance of energy in his body spread over to mine, stinging me like an electric shock. He talked without stopping, full of interest, in an amusing Belitong dialect, typical of those from remote areas. His eyes lit up as they glanced animatedly around the room. He was like an artillery plant. When drops of water fall on its petals, it shoots out pollen—glittering, blossoming and full of life. Being close to Lintang, I felt like I was being challenged to run in a hundred-meter dash. "How fast can you run?" his stare challenged.

Bu Mus then gave out forms for all of the parents to write their names, occupations and addresses. Each parent was busy filling out the form, except for Lintang's father. He hesitantly took the form and held onto it, tensely. The form was like an alien object in his hands. He looked to the left, and then to the right, seeing the other parents filling out the form. He stood up with a puzzled expression.

“Ibu Guru,” he said slowly, “Forgive me, I cannot read or write.”

Lintang’s father then added plaintively that he did not even know the year of his own birth. Suddenly Lintang got up from his seat and went over to his father, took the form from his hands and exclaimed, “I will be the one to fill out this form later, *Ibunda* Guru, after I have learned how to read and write!”

Everyone was startled to see Lintang, such a small child, defending his father.

ΩΩ

I myself still felt confused. It was a lot of new things for a small child to experience in such a short amount of time. Anxiety, happiness, worry, embarrassment, new friends, new teachers, all of them stirred about inside of me.

One more thing made matters even worse: a new pair of shoes my mother had bought me. I tried to hide the sight of my shoes by tucking my feet behind me. Black with white stripes and made of hard plastic, they looked like really ugly soccer shoes. This morning at breakfast, my older brothers laughed so hard their stomachs hurt. One look from my father was enough to silence them. But my feet hurt and my heart was embarrassed, both because of these shoes.

In the meantime, Lintang’s head was spinning around like an owl’s. For him, the miscellany of our classroom—a wooden ruler, a sixth grade student’s clay vase art project sitting on Bu Mus’ desk, the old-fashioned chalkboard and the chalk scattered about on the classroom floor, some of which had already been ground back into dust—was absolutely amazing.

Then I saw Lintang’s father, the pine tree man, watching his son grow increasingly excited, with a bittersweet smile. I understood. This was a man who didn’t even know his own birthday, imagining his son’s broken heart if he had to drop out in the first or second year of junior high for the classic reasons of money or the unfair demands of life. For him, education was an enigma. For as far back as Lintang’s father could remember, through four generations of their family, Lintang was the first to go to school. Many generations beyond his recollection, their ancestors lived during the antediluvian period, a time long ago when the Malay people lived as nomads. They wore clothing made from bark, slept in the branches of trees, and worshipped the moon.

ΩΩ

By and large, Bu Mus made our seating assignments based on who looked alike. Lintang and I were deskmates because we both had curly hair. Trapani sat with Mahar because they were the best looking, with features like idolized traditional Malay singers. Trapani wasn’t interested in the class; he kept stealing glances out the window, watching for his mother’s head to pop up every once in a while among the heads of the other parents.

But Borek and Kucai were seated together not because they looked alike, but because they were both difficult to control. Just a few moments into the class, Borek already was wiping a chalk eraser all over Kucai’s face. On top of this, Sahara, that small, veil-wearing girl, deliberately knocked over A Kiong’s water bottle, causing the Hokian-Chinese child to cry like he had seen a ghost. Sahara was extraordinarily hard-headed. That water bottle affair marked the beginning of a rivalry between them that would carry on for years to come. A Kiong’s crying nearly put a damper on that morning’s pleasant introductions.

For me, that morning was an unforgettable one that would stay with me for dozens of years. That morning, I saw Lintang clumsily grasping a large, unsharpened pencil as if he were holding a large knife. His father had bought him the wrong kind of pencil. It was two different colors, one end

red and the other blue. Wasn't that the kind of pencil tailors used to make marks on clothing? Or shoemakers to mark the leather? Whatever kind of pencil it was, it definitely was not for writing.

The book he bought also was the wrong kind of book. It had a dark blue cover and was three-lined. Wasn't that the kind of book we would use in second grade when we learned how to write in cursive? But the thing I will never forget is that, on that morning, I witnessed a boy from the coast, my deskmate, hold a book and pencil for the very first time. And in the years to come, everything he would write would be the fruit of a bright mind, and every sentence he spoke would act as a radiant light. And as time went on, that impoverished coastal boy would outshine the dark nimbus cloud that had for so long overshadowed this school as he evolved into the most brilliant person I've ever met in all the years of my life.

CHAPTER 3 The Glass Display Case

It isn't very hard to describe our school. It was one among hundreds—maybe even thousands—of poor schools in Indonesia that, if bumped by a frenzied goat preparing to mate, would collapse and fall to pieces.

We only had two teachers for all subjects and grades. We didn't have uniforms. We didn't even have a toilet. Our school was built on the edge of a forest, so when nature called, all we had to do was slip off into the bushes. Our teacher would watch after us, just in case we were bitten by a snake in the outhouse.

We didn't have a first aid kit either. When we were sick, whatever it was—diarrhea, swelling, cough, flu, itching—the teacher gave us a large, round pill that resembled a raincoat button. It was white and tasted bitter, and after taking it you felt full. There were three large letters on the pill: APC—Aspirin, Phenacetin and Caffeine. The APC pill was legendary throughout the outskirts of Belitong as a magic medicine that could cure any illness. This generic cure-all was the government's solution to make up for the underallocation of healthcare funds for the poor.

Our school was never visited by officials, school administrators, or members of the legislative assembly. The only routine visitor was a man dressed like a ninja. He wore a large aluminum tube on his back and a hose trailed behind him. He looked like he was going to the moon. This man was sent by the department of health to spray for mosquitoes with chemical gas. Whenever the thick white puffs arose like smoke signals, we cheered and shouted with joy.

Our school wasn't guarded because there wasn't anything worth stealing. A yellow bamboo flagpole was the only thing that indicated this was a school building. A green chalkboard displaying a sun with white rays hung crookedly from the flagpole. Written in the middle was:

SD MD
Sekolah Dasar Muhammadiyah

There was a sentence written in Arabic directly under the sun. After I mastered Arabic in the second grade, I knew the sentence read *amar makruf nahi mungkar*, meaning “do what is good and prevent what is evil”—the primary principle of Muhammadiyah, the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia with more than 30 million members. Those words were ingrained in our

souls and remained there throughout the journey to adulthood; we knew them like the back of our own hands.

If seen from afar, our school looked like it was about to tumble over. The old wooden beams were slanted, unable to endure the weight of the heavy roof. It resembled a copra shed. The construction of the building hadn't followed proper architectural principles. The windows and door couldn't be locked because they were not symmetrical with their frames, but they never needed to be locked anyway.

The atmosphere inside the class could be described with words like these: underutilized, astonishing, and bitterly touching. Underutilized, among other things, was a decrepit glass display case with a door that wouldn't stay closed. A wedge of paper was the only thing that could keep it shut. Inside a proper classroom, such a display case usually held photos of successful alumni or of the principal with ministers of education, or vice-principals with vice-ministers of education; or it would be used to display plaques, medals, certificates, and trophies of the school's prestigious achievements. But in our class, the big glass display case stood untouched in the corner. It was a pathetic fixture completely void of content because no government officials wanted to visit our teachers, there were no graduates to be proud of, and we certainly hadn't achieved anything prestigious yet.

Unlike other elementary school classrooms, there were no multiplication tables inside our classroom. We also had no calendar. There wasn't even a picture of the President and Vice-President of Indonesia or our state symbol—the strange bird with an eight-feathered tail always looking to the right. The one thing we had hanging up in our class was a poster. It was directly behind Bu Mus' desk, and it was there to cover up a big hole in one of the wall planks. The poster showed a man with a dense beard. He wore a long, flowing robe and had a guitar stylishly slung over his shoulder. His melancholic eyes were aflame, like he had already experienced life's tremendous trials, and he appeared truly determined to oppose all wickedness on the face of this earth. He was sneaking a peek at the sky, and a lot of money was falling down toward his face. He was Rhoma Irama, the dangdut singer, a Malay back-country idol—our Elvis Presley. On the bottom of the poster were two statements that, when I first started school, I could not comprehend. But in second grade, when I could read, I learned that it shouted: RHOMA IRAMA, HUJAN DUIT! Rhoma Irama, rain of money!

Displaying the President's and Vice-President's photo and the state symbol *Garuda Pancasila*—which includes that strange bird with an eight-feathered tail always looking to the right (the Garuda) and the five state principles (*Pancasila*)—is mandatory in Indonesian schools. When being evaluated as a model school, these photos are a determining factor. But at our school it didn't matter because it wasn't a model school—let alone ever evaluated. No one ever came to inspect whether or not we had the mandatory pictures hanging, since the school board barely acknowledged our existence. It was as if our school was lost in time and space. But whatever, we had an even better picture: Rhoma Irama!

Imagine the worst possible problems for an elementary school classroom: a roof with leaks so large that students see planes flying in the sky and have to hold umbrellas while studying on rainy days; a cement floor continually decomposing into sand; strong winds that rattle the nerves of the students and shake their souls with the fear of their school collapsing; and students who want to enter the class but first have to usher goats out of the room. We experienced all of these things. So, my friend, talking about the poverty of our school is no longer interesting. What is more interesting is the people who dedicated their lives to ensuring the survival of a school like this. Those people are none other than our school principal, Pak Harfan, and Bu Mus.

CHAPTER 4

A Grizzly Bear

Like our school, Pak Harfan is easy to describe. His thick mustache was connected to a dense brown beard, dull and sprinkled with grays. His face, in short, was a bit scary.

If anyone asked Pak Harfan about his tangled beard, he wouldn't bother giving an explanation but instead would hand them a copy of a book titled *Keutamaan Memelihara Jenggot*, or *The Excellence of Caring for a Beard*. Reading the introduction alone was enough to make anyone ashamed of having asked the question in the first place.

On this first day, Pak Harfan wore a simple shirt that at some point must have been green, but was now white. The shirt was still shadowed by faint traces of color. His undershirt was full of holes and his pants were faded from being washed one too many times. The cheap, braided plastic belt hugging his body had many notches—he had probably worn it since he was a teenager. For the sake of Islamic education, Pak Harfan had been serving the Muhammadiyah school for dozens of years without payment. He supported his family from a crop garden in the yard of their home.

Because Pak Harfan looked quite like a grizzly bear, we were scared the first time we saw him. Small children would throw a fit at the sight of him. But when he began to speak to us that first morning, his welcome address emerged like poetic pearls of wisdom, and a joyous atmosphere enveloped his humble school. Almost immediately, he won our hearts. Pak Harfan's threadbare collar hung loose as he told us the tale of Noah's Ark and the pairs of animals saved from the epic flood.

"There were those who refused to heed the warning that flood waters were coming," he said, beginning his story animatedly. We watched with enchantment and hung onto his every word.

"And so, arrogance blinded their eyes and deafened their ears, until they were crushed under the waves..."

The tale left a big impression on us. Moral lesson number one for me: If you are not diligent in praying, you must be a good swimmer.

He went on to tell a mesmerizing story of a historical war during the time of the Prophet in which the forces were comprised of priests, not soldiers: the Badar War. Just 313 Muslim troops defeated thousands of evil, well-armed Quraisy troops.

"Let it be known, family of Ghudar! You will fall to your deaths within the next 30 days!" Pak Harfan shouted clearly while looking intently through the classroom window at the sky, yelling out the dreams of a Meccan prophesying the destruction of Quraisy in the great Badar War.

Hearing his shouts made me want to jump up from my seat. We were flabbergasted; Pak Harfan's heavy voice had shaken the threads of our souls. We leaned forward waiting for more, straining our spirited chests wanting to defend the struggle of our religious forefathers.

Then Pak Harfan cooled down the mood with a story of the suffering experienced by the founders of our school—how they were suppressed by the colonial Dutch, abandoned by the government, cared about by no one, but nonetheless stood firmly to pursue their big dreams for education.

Pak Harfan told all of his tales with the enthusiasm of his telling of the Badar War, but at the same time, with the serenity of the morning breeze. We were spellbound by his every word and gesture. There was a gentle influence and goodness about him. His demeanor was that of a wise, brave man who had been through life's bitter difficulties, had knowledge as vast as the ocean, was willing to take risks, and was genuinely interested in explaining things in ways that others could understand.

Even that first day, we could tell Pak Harfan was truly in his element in front of the students. He was a *guru* in the true sense of the word, its Hindi meaning: a person who not only transfers knowledge but who also is a friend and spiritual guide for his students. He often raised and lowered

his intonation, holding the edges of his desk while emphasizing certain words and then throwing up both hands like someone performing a rain dance.

When we asked questions in class, he would run toward us in small steps, staring at us meaningfully with his calm eyes as if we were the most precious of Malay children. He whispered into our ears, fluently recited poetry and Koranic verses, challenged our comprehension, touched our hearts with knowledge, and then fell silent, like one daydreaming about a long lost love. It was so beautiful.

Through humble words, as powerful as raindrops, he brought to us the very essence of the simple life's righteousness. He inspired us to study and dazzled us with his advice to never surrender in the face of difficulties. Our first lesson from Pak Harfan was about standing firmly with conviction and a strong desire to reach our dreams. He convinced us that life could be happy even in poverty, so long as, with spirit, one gave, rather than took, as much as one could.

We didn't even blink watching this magnificent storyteller. He was a worn-out looking man with shabby clothing, but his pure thinking and words shone brightly. When he spoke, we listened, fixed in enchantment and observing intently, impatiently waiting for his next string of words. I felt unbelievably lucky to be there, amidst these amazing people. There was a beauty in this poor school, a beauty that I wouldn't trade for a thousand luxurious schools.

When Pak Harfan wanted to test us on the story he just finished, our hands shot up—even though we weren't sure whether or not we knew the answer—and vied for the chance to answer before he even had a chance to ask his question.

Sadly, the energetic and captivating teacher had to excuse himself from the class, because his session was over. One hour with him felt like one minute. We followed each inch of his trail until he left the classroom. Our stares could not be torn away because we had fallen in love with him and he had already made us fall in love with this old school. The general course from Pak Harfan on our first day at Muhammadiyah Elementary School strongly imbedded in our hearts the desire to defend this nearly collapsing school, no matter what.

ΩΩ

Bu Mus then took over the class. Introductions. One by one, each student came forward and introduced him or herself. Finally it was A Kiong's turn. His tears had subsided, but he was still sobbing. He was asked to come up to the front of the room, and he was delighted. In between sobs, he smiled. He clutched an empty water bottle in his left hand—empty because Sahara had spilled its contents—and strongly held onto its lid with his right.

"Please say your name and address," Bu Mus tenderly told the Hokian child.

A Kiong stared hesitantly at Bu Mus, and then went back to smiling. His father made his way up through the crowd of parents, wanting to see his child in action. However, even though he had been asked repeatedly, A Kiong did not say one word. He just continued smiling.

"Go ahead," Bu Mus nudged once more.

A Kiong answered only with his smile. He kept glancing at his father, who appeared to be growing more impatient by the second. I could read his father's mind: *"Come on son, strengthen your heart and say your name! At least say your father's name, just once! Don't shame the Hokians!"* The Chinese father had a friendly face. He was a farmer, the lowest status in the social ranks of Chinese in Belitong.

Bu Mus coaxed him one last time.

"Okay, this is your last chance to introduce yourself. If you aren't ready yet, then you need to return to your seat."

But instead of showing dejection at his failure to answer, A Kiong became even happier. He didn't say anything at all. His smile was wide and his chipmunk cheeks flushed with color. Moral lesson number two: Don't ask the name and address of someone who lives on a farm.

And so ended the introductions in that memorable month of February.

Translated from the Indonesian by Angie Kilbane